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The Span of an Octave

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So, the story goes something like this: A boy—we will call him Samuel—knocks on the door of a professional pianist’s studio in Bevington, Massachusetts, and, stuttering, asks to be taught. It does not surprise the pianist (who, I should tell you now, is no less than the one and only Glenda Himmelricht, though you probably guessed so, as anyone who knows anything about music would), because she’s used to that kind of thing. And I might as well tell you now that the pianist in the story is me, but this will not skew the narrative in the least, because I have been, for as long as I can remember, the most humble person I know. As the recipient of a story, it’s natural to block out certain bits here and there, to latch onto details that seem, to you, the most important. Do as you will. But what you should remember in this story above all else is that Ms. Himmelricht has been described as a woman with a visionary, instinctive sense of foresight, and that she had understood, ever since eating her toast and marmalade that morning, that someone intriguing would arrive at her door.

What the boy’s face looked like, what my colleagues at St. Peter’s thought of me taking him as a student—these are not important. And so, imagine something like this: It is July. Ms. Himmelricht is lying on the cold tiles of her office floor, fanning her face with a book of Rachmaninoff etudes, when her door creaks halfway open and a small, melon-round head of scrappy blond hair pokes wide-eyed into the room. She watches his skittish eyes flash to the nine-foot long Steinway before meeting her face, and she does not sit up off the floor right away as if she were embarrassed to be seen in so awkward a position, because, frankly, she is not one to become unnerved by others’ judgments.

The boy begins, “I—I knocked—but I—”
"I know," she says. "I heard. Can I help you?" She asks this, but she knows why he is here—another naive outsider oblivious to the concept of appointments or waiting lists, hopelessly deaf to the plain, audible truth of their lacking musical talents. The great pianist gets girls and boys like Samuel several times a week, young ones sent by hopeful parents to beg in person for instruction from the famous Ms. Himmelricht, the piano master, the living legend of impeccable rhythm with her blessedly large hands that span an astounding eleven keys on a standard piano.

The pianist sits up finally and shakes out her wrists.

"My name—it's Sam," the boy says. His hands clutch a small stack of photocopied music, shaking perhaps more fiercely than his voice. "My—my name's Sam." He looks to be about eight years old, about the age she herself was when her parents schlepped their belongings—three suitcases and little Glenda—onto a train in Austria, to a ship on the French coast, and bobbed their way over to America, the land of opportunity. The pianist wonders what role to play with this one, whether she should blast into her usual tirade about abusing copyright laws or respecting privacy, or if she should at least have the boy play a few minutes and then smile generously, as she does with some of them, and say she's sorry to turn him away—she's not taking new students—but keep up the good work.

"I have B-b-Bach—brought—to play—"

"Well, I'm afraid that—," the pianist begins her rejection. She will send him away tenderly, she decides, for though she doesn't like children, she still has a reputation to preserve among the community and the university (one can't risk getting a bad name at a school as small as St. Peter's—one bad rumor and there goes tenure). But just as she begins to send this boy away, she blacks out for a quick moment in a fit of punctuated inhales and exhales, leading to a gargantuan sneeze, and the boy is already at her Steinway, feet dangling from the piano bench like thin bodies from the gallows. It is as if, in that split second when her eyes are closed, his body has magically vanished from the doorway and reappeared, seated at the piano, without even a pianissimo sound of movement, even to her sensitive, trained, state-of-the art ears.
Perhaps it was that instant—his reappearance—that first intrigued me. Or it could have been the way he fumbled and heaved his bone-thin body into the keys, or how on staccato notes he balled his hands into fists and protruded an index finger outward from each to poke at the ivory and black, as if being dared to touch a surface of molten steel. Whatever it was that caught my attention, it grabbed me like a hand of God.

But that is irrelevant. The story stands without it. There is no other way to explain why I felt captured by his pounding and clanging, the inharmonic chords that hardly sounded like music at all, more like a mechanized, distorted monster of unmetered rhythms. Whatever it was, he had me addicted (though he was not in the farthest stretch talented—perhaps the worst I had ever heard, in fact), something that magnetized me, that left me no choice but to accept him as my student, an action of mine which I have not, in all the months since, been able to figure out. Which is why I am telling you all of this in the first place—not for you, the reader, but for me, for solace, closure, answers—it’s for me, to determine what it was in his playing that was so terribly powerful, so delightfully wretched, and how, for the first time ever, I became so wrapped up in something so strikingly unmusical that I lost my ability to foresee—to foresee that he would rise to such talent, to foresee the dreadful thing he would do with his skill, and that no one would ever know it was not his fault all along, but mine.

I should remind you once again what is of central pertinence to this story: it is not simply to be told and shut away, not a tale merely to bring tears to the eyes or goose pimples to the skin. It’s a recollection for sorting out, for coming to grips with the barren, gray-walled home in which I now live, as if in exile, hiding (just the Steinway and I, the clothing, soap, a few photos) smack in the middle of the country. It’s to cope with the small town of people who don’t know who I am. For me to understand why, when I look out my window in the morning, I see flat, bare land peppered with farmhouses, and a sea of dead, battered cornhusks smothered by an unending, anemic sky.

The pianist shares a duplex now with a middle-aged couple, and she
can hear them walking above her, the squeaking floorboards of their comings and goings. Their twin girls wear matching flannel dresses and rubber snow boots, and they hide their eyes when the pianist walks by, as if to protect themselves from some hideous animal. Their names are Anna and Sonja—she knows this much from the chalk drawings littered on the sidewalks, flowers and hearts and hopscotch squares that slurry together in the colorless drizzle.

Some niceties here are worth mentioning, I suppose: the cousin Gloria who lives just over the bridge—the pianist’s only American relative—who brings the pianist to her house on Sundays for dinner with her husband and their colicky newborn. Beef chili from a can, overcooked broccoli—it’s food nonetheless (the pianist has had to lower her standards), and she feels grateful, at least a little, to have a free meal, a friendly conversation, even if artificial, even if they cannot understand (she has told them the story, more or less) where she has come from and why. Gloria clips classifieds from the paper and saves them in an envelope, which she gives the pianist every Sunday. Jobs she believes the pianist would enjoy. And it’s true, the severance pay is quickly dwindling. But that, still, is a matter the pianist prefers not to discuss.

Picture now: Young Samuel returns the following Tuesday, promptly at 3:45, a crumpled paper sack in hand and a thick woolen scarf tied loosely around his neck. The pianist has seen, from her window, a woman she believes to be Samuel’s mother, leading the boy across campus to the Music Building—the same woman she has seen pacing around the city in a full-length down coat and mittens, no matter the season, as if she expects a winter storm in mid-summer. And so the pianist assumes, whatever the reason, this odd woman has clothed her child in the same fashion. The woman wanders by the campus nearly every day, her feet inching across the pavement, one wiry arm bracing a metal chair that she unfolds periodically—in the middle of the sidewalk—and sits. Ten or fifteen minutes, watching the cars chug past. The pianist is not one to judge, but she cannot deny that this woman stands out like a tuba among flutes, that the mere sight of her is, in a word, unsettling.
The boy nods his head down for a moment and scratches the back of one leg with the foot of the other. "Hel, Hello Ms. Himm—" he begins.

The pianist can’t help but cringe at the sight of a stringy, wet tissue hanging from the pocket of his patched-over blue jeans. "Good afternoon," she says, rubbing thick salve over her knuckles. The last few days have seen a dry spell, not significant enough for most to notice, but enough for her hyper-alert skin to sound the alarm of an eminent chapping.

“How have you been, Samuel?” the pianist asks. Though she is not surprised when the boy only responds with a simple “Fine,” she has not prepared more in the way of conversation starters.

Before we go on, you should know that the pianist is not a very feminine woman. She is, of course, pleasing to the eyes in most conventional means of the word, but her forearms are thick and her shoulders are wide from years of unwavering dedication to an art of the upper body. She does not harbor even a dying trace of romantic instinct—from the moment she heard Chopin and Grieg, at the age of ten, the pianist knew she would never need men in her life, and indeed she has never been proven wrong. And if you’re looking for maternal instincts—well, a cobra most definitely has more than the pianist.

“Very well, then,” she says. “Off with your coat and on with your scales!”

She points the boy to her old, boxy Yamaha upright in the corner and he begins to play, though the pianist doesn’t hear the first few tones as his fingers stumble up three octaves of a C-major scale. No, she doesn’t hear the first notes at all, because she had not, until now, noticed the smallness of his hands. Not only this, but the stubbiness of his fingers, his palms being all too narrow for success. It is only two or three seconds later that she sighs and says quietly, "Oh, no, that will never do.” She cringes then when she realizes, despite all her efforts over the years to prevent it, her utterance sounds precisely like what her father would have said to her when she was Samuel’s age, that father whose memory is as pleasant as two violas playing out of tune.

Now, the pianist is quite an honest woman, and it would be the
most discordant of lies to say that she does not feel her Earl Grey and shortbread rising in her throat like the gradually growing roll of a timpani. It would be untrue to say that the pianist doesn’t consider how close Professor Flink’s office is, how Flink had raised her eyebrows as the boy tripped over his shoelaces into Ms. Himmelricht’s studio.

The pianist interrupts the boy mid-scale. “A little hot in here, don’t you think?” she says, more statement than question. She darts to the windows and shoves them open with her sweaty hands before turning to the boy again. The air outside is thick, humidity fogging the windowpanes, and sudden gusts of wind scatter small branches across the university’s tidy sidewalks. The pianist does not believe in superstition, no, but she does admit to herself momentarily that something heavy is shifting in the atmosphere.

You see, the pianist is rarely (if ever) wrong with her instincts, so she represses the urge to demote the boy into the lower ranks of community piano instructors. And over the following months, she will repress it again and again until... oh, who knows when. Partly for the boy’s sake—despite her international reputation, the awards, the fellowships, the pianist still remembers what it’s like to be timid, though it’s been some thirty-five years. And partly for her own sake, first and foremost. To release him would be to surrender, an admittance of the most shameful breed. We all have things we have to protect, after all. No, it couldn’t be done.

“Very good, Samuel,” the pianist proclaims, though it pains her. “Let’s hear an etude, and then you can go home early today.” She checks the door before the boy starts, pressing her torso against it to assure it is tightly closed. She then trills off the same catch-phrases she gives her graduate and upper undergrad students, though she suspects him too young to understand: “Feel the music, Samuel,” she says. “Just look at the keys for a moment.”

The boy tilts his head downward, moving his eyes closer to the keys in front of him.

“Think of their individual voices. Let the music play itself.” The pianist begins to ask herself, why bother?

And she is not quite sure how it happens, though she’s heard of
it happening before: the master musician, the light-switch of genius flicking on and off at an unpredictable whim. So there she is—standing over him from behind, looking down upon a blond head in need of a trim and a heavy dandruff scrubbing. Yet these details hardly catch her attention longer than a grace note’s length, because young Samuel is, all of a sudden, poised with his twiggy arms at right angles in the air, shifting his weight into the notes, dancing with the melody like a professional trapped in an awkward child’s body.

That change—I didn’t know how exactly it happened. But the small boy who’d stumbled in my office the week before had disappeared. He was waltzing up the keys as if he had written the song himself, was closing his eyes and bowing his head as his hands slid up to the high E and down to a low C and ended—both of them, somehow—with an expansion almost inhuman. Those short stumps of fingers spreading to an octave—eight notes on each hand, mind you—and those eyes clenching closed as he ended the piece, his fingers holding their stretch, the tones reverberating in the old piano’s wooden chamber, against the windowpanes, across the plaster walls, inside my chest. Like a hallelujah in an open sanctuary. Like the affirmative “Pre-cise-ly!” of my father from his armchair, clouded in pipe smoke as he listened to me practice and found, on the rare occasion, that I had met his expectations.

Who knows how long the boy held those octaves. Even I can’t tell you. Even I can’t tell you how we ended the lesson, what I said to him (if anything, other than the routine criticism about articulations and dynamics and see you next week, as scheduled, and write down your minutes in your practice log) because, frankly, even I don’t remember much else, just those unsuspecting, dirty little hands spanning those octaves, falling on the white keys heavily, deliberately.

For the pianist, any trifle can be mended with a few moments of Schubert, both hands immersed into sixty-fourth notes, black ink-spills scattered on the page. And indeed, even after her first few lessons with Samuel, she is able to shake the eerie apprehension. That is, she is able to shove aside her wonderment about the boy’s unnaturally rapid development of skill, the way he could, at the start, hardly play the
scales without a dozen mistakes, but within a week had them perfected. And how his body seemed to float weightless, without an indentation on the worn, upholstered bench cushion. The pianist cannot figure out why he practices, having no incentive other than the evasion of her disappointment, but she is able to assure herself that the boy is simply a quick learner. Naturally gifted, like herself.

Yes, until she increases his lessons to twice a week, until she has him playing on her Steinway instead of the old Yamaha, she still feels grounded. But I recognize now (oh, if I actually had the foresight I thought I did) that once I made that move, everything started to change.

I suppose, as the teller of this story, I should describe to you the lesson in which Samuel came with ice cream on his fingers, and how the pianist had to show him to the gentlemen’s restrooms to wash himself. I should tell you of this day, because every day afterward, Samuel’s childlike attributes ceased to inspire the normal revulsion in me, and from there on out, he never faltered from the code of etiquette (hands washed, music in order, no chewing gum). And I suppose I should tell you about the day he started wearing button-down shirts and ironed pants, which, though extreme for his age, nonetheless flattered me. But these events need not be developed like the day, after three weeks of instruction, when Samuel broke his barrier of silence and the pianist was no longer tempted to terminate his lessons.

The weather is quite peculiar this week, the thick, warm air of summer one minute and the cold plummet of hail the next. Samuel’s slicker is drenched when he walks into the pianist’s office, the soles of his galoshes squeaking as he marches in the room, leaving a trail of filmy brown prints on the white tiles.

“Good day, Samuel,” the pianist begins, per usual. “How have you been?” She moves to the piano, rotating the knobs on the side of the bench to lower it for the boy, completely unprepared for what is to happen next.

The boy clears his throat. “Good,” he says, then pauses. “I practiced,” he continues. “Lots and lots. I practiced lots and lots.”
The pianist startles, unsure of her ears, but the boy, still standing by the bench, speaks again within seconds, as if reassuring her doubts that this little chap has finally offered more than nervous monosyllables. "See, look Ms. Himmelricht," the boy says, thrusting out a tightly folded sheet of notebook paper. "My mom signed her name on the bottom. I practiced so much, see?"

The pianist unfolds the sheet of wrinkled, softened paper and surveys what she would normally conclude to be an obvious fabrication of recorded practice hours. A boy like this could not have practiced thirty hours in one week, and she fully expects her ears to confirm her suspicion. But when she looks down at his face, eyes wide and round, brows raised expectantly like a dog waiting for a biscuit, the pianist has a whimsical impulse to humor the child. "Very nice, Samuel. Your mother and father, what do they do?" She envisions Samuel's mother, fold-up chair in hand, her gaunt body bundled tight.

The boy cocks his head and looks at her with scrunched brows. "My parents do a lot of things," he says.

The pianist gestures the boy to the bench with a sweeping arm. Openly, not commanding, for she still fears she might scare him away. "Oh me," she says, "I mean to ask—what are their jobs? How do they make their money. For instance, when I was a child, my father was a bricklayer, and he lost three fingers and could never play an instrument—"

And that is when their first real moment happens, the first time the pianist begins talking to Samuel as a person. A child, yes, but capable of understanding. Not simply an extra twenty dollars that comes knocking at her office every Tuesday and Friday. Not just an amusement or experiment, which I must admit now, was part of my original intent in accepting him as a student.

The pianist, over the course of this conversation, does not think about the lesson, the arpeggios and theory she had assigned the week before, because the boy is speaking—a different boy than the one she had known until this point—words tumbling out of him like rocks in a landslide, like an aria from his child's lips. He tells the pianist of his mother, her stacks of cookbooks in the kitchen, the cabbage soup
he hates which she makes every week, her weak lungs and coughing fits at night, so loud at times they wake him from his dreams. He tells her of his father, the tall, stern carpenter who sleeps in his tool belt, who wakes some mornings unable to straighten the fingers of his hammering hand. A father who called in sick last week to fly tissue-paper kites with Samuel on Kennedy Hill.

The pianist listens to these details, their fullness and tone, but she sees in her mind not a vision of the mother and father the boy describes, but rather, her own. She sees her mother washing a paisley skirt in the kitchen sink and mending her father’s fraying straw hat by lamplight, and she hears the conviction in her father’s voice the night he decided to leave America, his foot pounding the floor with each word: Never—come—back—so—help—me—God! She remembers the bottles of gin he drank like water, and his stride up the plank onto the boat that would take him and the pianist’s mother back to Europe—for good—without her. Ten long years. Empty pockets. She remembers the day he made her choose: stay or go. And she wonders if Samuel feels clamped in the way she did, a talent discovered so young, the pride and approval of others hinging on every press of the fingers on ivory.

They have not played a single note—neither Samuel nor Ms. Himmelricht—they have not even opened the etude book when four thick-fisted knocks crack against her door. The pianist opens it in a flustered pull to find Olivia Wilcox, the department’s finest M.F.A., her sunburned arms crossed over her chest and exasperated tears brimming under her thick, black-frame glasses as she throws a conspicuous glance at the hallway clock, now nearing half past five.

A few weeks later, the pianist enrolls the boy in a regional festival. The Clementi sonatina he had memorized was quite close to perfect. And, as any musician knows, performance should begin at a young age, as a sport or foreign language should in order to be mastered, so the stage is no longer a foreign land, so walking up in front of an audience of a hundred or two is as second nature as riding a bicycle. (I still remember when I realized this: in a performance of Beethoven’s
“Sonata Pathetique” when I was eighteen, just a month before my parents returned to Europe and left me behind them for the last time, to live with my aunt and find my own way. I waltzed up onto the stage as if it were my own home, hearing only my father’s words: You need not to think, only to play. These words reverberated in me when I hit the last note—the wrong one.)

The pianist, however, is unable to attend Samuel’s performance—he had been called upon for the prestigious honor of guest-performing with the Munich Symphony Orchestra, and, knowing she was the best for the job (and imagining the horror of anyone but herself doing it), there had been no consideration of denying the offer. The boy would get along without her. (And, of course, he had.) Upon returning to her office the following Monday (unfazed by jet lag), her colleague, Professor Brewer, (whom she had once overheard in the restroom say of the pianist, “She’s not all she cracks herself up to be”) stops her in the hallway and proclaims almost apologetically, “That was quite a sonatina you missed, Ms. Himmelricht.” And Professor Kliemens, the cellist whose office is next door, barges in during the pianist’s “personal hour,” which the pianist never spends buying lunch downtown or going to the recreational center like other professors, but always performing important visualization exercises and soaking her knuckles in a warm paraffin solution for the prevention of future swelling. “I hate to interrupt,” Professor Kliemens says, noticing the pianist’s hands in the warm wax, “but I just had to tell you that I thought you were nuts, back in July, for teaching a kid.” Kliemens shakes her head, as if tasting a particularly exquisite morsel of food or wine. “That Samuel Parson is really something else, Ms. Himmelricht.”

The pianist responds to these compliments in the normal manner—cordial acknowledgement and agreement. But when the boy comes for his lesson without a check from his mother—yet again—the pianist recognizes the pattern. Above all, she respects honesty.

“Samuel,” the pianist says. She pulls up a chair to the boy, who is situating his sheets of Debussy at the Steinway. “Did your mother send a check today?” she asks. She looks him straight in the eyes and has not, until now, noticed how piercingly blue they are, the color
of a cloth artificially dyed. A bizarre thought crosses her mind for a fleeting instant: this child might someday surpass her talent. But that is nonsense, she knows. Her name will be glorified in the music history books as Samuel’s instructor, the woman who made the master a master. But if that horrible situation were somehow to happen, that the prodigy would climb beyond her own skill, she would most certainly by that point be dead, and at least wouldn’t have to suffer the conscious humiliation.

The boy looks away from her quickly, twiddling his fingers. “Oh, yes yes,” he says. “I have some money today.” In a wisp of motion he pounces off the bench and darts over to his red satchel, hanging on a peg by the door, all the while whispering to himself, “Yes, money today, I have money today.”

The boy returns with a small plastic bag of loose change, closed at the top with a white twist tie. Interspersed between the bronze and silver coins are a few crumpled dollar bills. He drops the baggie with a clink into her lap and begins playing whole-tone scales—a concept she introduced in his previous lesson—before she has a chance to respond. The pianist is not sure whether to react with flattery or guilt: she envisions this small boy pawing between sofa cushions, leafing through curbside litter for her payment, or stealing from the laundry-money jar (because the pianist is sure, from the smell of the child’s clothes at times, that his parents must certainly not have machines themselves or the funds to clean the boy’s clothes as often as necessary). This boy—bent intently over the keys, one tiny leg swaying from the bench—this boy, a beggar. And each lesson after that when the boy does not pay her, she simply lets it go. Until one day she forgets about the money entirely.

Because it was not about money. Not in the least.

So, imagine now a time in early September when Samuel’s mother appears at the pianist’s apartment, just as she is measuring rice into a heavy iron pot. It’s not that the pianist hadn’t sensed something odd brewing: an uncanny feeling deep in her bowels all afternoon, accompanied by a terrible bout of flatulence, had been enough to signal that something was festering in the finale of the day. Yet she still
feels a touch startled at the sight of this woman, so abruptly invading her quiet abode. She is perhaps even more startled that someone would welcome the infamous ‘Chair Lady’ inside the building, since the pianist lives in the prestigious area of studio apartments in the heart of the city—up the hill from the rose garden and two blocks from the gallery strip—and people of that caliber, of course, have earned their way up the ladder and prefer not to mingle with those otherwise, those like this woman in worn jeans and a frumpish flannel shirt.

So, this woman, this mother, fully interrupts the pianist, who is busy contemplating her downstairs neighbor’s door chime, whether it rings a first-inversion E-minor chord or a second-inversion (it’s the carpet, you see, that obscures the tones, and not, by any means, the pianist’s inability to distinguish what she hears).

“Well,” the pianist says, regaining her composure, “you’re here.” She continues measuring the rice and pours the water over the small, white grains.

“Um...yes,” the woman mumbles, clearly confused. “We haven’t met before.”

“No, I don’t believe we have, not formally,” the pianist says, “but of course I know who you are.” The pianist thinks of Samuel’s brown lunch sacks and his timid diligence, and she vows to befriend this woman, despite her instincts and what others might say.

The mother edges her way into the kitchen, moving slowly around the room with her back against the cupboards until she stands directly across from the pianist, facing her. She shoves her hands into her coat pockets, pulls them out, removes her scarf and her holey, knitted stocking cap, and thrusts her hands into her pockets again.

“Bloody wretched cold snap we’ve been having, wouldn’t you say?” the pianist asks.

“Oh. Well yes,” the mother replies.

“You may remove your coat, Mrs. Parson.”

The woman, however, proceeds to pick at a scab on her hand. She glances at the rice, just beginning to simmer on the stovetop, and says, “Oh, oh no. I’ll come back later, when you’re not cooking your dinner.”
“Nonsense,” exclaims the pianist, a little too loudly. She moves to the stove and covers the pot with a lid. “I’m not really cooking anything but the rice,” she says. She considers explaining that she doesn’t really cook at all—the risk of knives and burns and whatnot—but she figures that it’s all Greek to this mother.

“Delivery should be here any minute,” the pianist explains, though the woman is clearly not interested. “They charge an infernal fee for extra rice, if you ask me, so I just cook that part myself.” The pianist knows that she may be well-off, but do they think she likes to give her money away? Hardly.

“Mrs. Parson,” the pianist begins. She gestures to her table and says, “Come sit a spell,” attempting to calm this woman with the folksier, lower-class speech to which she must be accustomed.

But the mother seems not to hear her. Instead, she walks over to the dishwasher and begins pulling out clean dishes, the steam of a freshly finished load wafting into her face. The pianist, for once, is confounded, watching this woman, this timid mother of her student, moving gracefully, as if in a dance to some silent orchestra. She places each dish in its proper place, without a sound other than her shallow, raspy breathing, one dish at a time, as if she knew this kitchen, as if it were her own.

“I have to say,” the pianist begins, “I am more than impressed with your young Samuel’s playing. The other day, last Tuesday it was, he was practicing Bach’s ‘Gigue in B-flat,’ First Partita, and you see, I had only given it to him one week prior, and he had it nearly perfected, I mean to say graduate-level, and—”

“That’s why I’ve come to talk to you,” the mother interjects. “I don’t want him to—”

“Nonsense,” the pianist continues. “Don’t worry about the money, I know you can’t pay. Clearly.”

“But well,” the mother attempts again, “you see that’s not what I’ve come to—”

“Just yesterday,” the pianist continues, moving to the stove, inserting her hands, her precious hands, into industrial-sized, heat-proof oven mitts, “my colleagues, Professor Brewer and Professor Kliemens, I
overheard them in the hallway as I was drinking my tea in the faculty lounge, and they were bantering on and on about why I wouldn’t let us jointly instruct Samuel—they’re jealous, you see, and—”

The timer cuts the pianist off with its metallic trilling. The pianist turns to the burner and shifts the rice carefully to a trivet on the counter. But when she turns around again, the woman is somehow (almost magically, though the pianist doesn’t believe in magic) dressed again in her full winter getup, hat on, coat fully zipped, scarf knotted tightly around her bony neck. The pianist jumps, for the mother, who had appeared so fidgety and submissive, now stands but three inches from her face. The pianist can clearly see the centers of her watering eyes, red at the edges and narrowed. And before the woman vanishes, gusted out the door as if by a wind, she holds her gloved hand up to the pianist’s face, points a straight, quivering finger and says, with the utmost shocking clarity, “Ms. Himmelricht. I want to thank you for teaching Samuel. But whatever it is you are doing to him—”

The mother pauses to exhale. “Whatever it is you are doing to my son, I am telling you to stop it.”

The day is one that the pianist shoves away into the corners of her most stifled memory. In fact, I did not recall it happening at all until months later, after vacating my apartment and fleeing Bevington as quickly as possible: the runway whirring below from the window of the jet plane as it built speed, lifted up, and rose into the sky, making the city lights, the crawling traffic, as small as a Christmas snow village.

And it is nearing Christmas, at that time, on this day in which the pith of the story sprouts, when the pianist makes her grandest mistake. It is the day of the faculty recital, the culminating event of the department. A chance to gather and commemorate the year’s accomplishments and bask in the glory of music, as the department chair so idealistically claims. But the pianist knows, as all the other professors know (though none stoop to say it), that the purpose is not camaraderie, but exhibition. A chance to flaunt, to establish who, among them is the finest of the fine, the most musical of the musical (which they all know, deep inside themselves, is and always will be Ms.
Himmelricht). It is three hours before the performance, and the pianist has cancelled her afternoon appointments in order to rehearse the duet with the boy. She cannot help but feel claustrophobic in the basement practice room—the only room she could safely reserve without the others overhearing their rehearsal—surrounded by four austere white walls, paint chipping from the cold cement.

The boy, for a change, appears distracted: the pianist has had to remind him four times not to overlook the rests, which are scattered throughout his part.

"Samuel!" she bellows. "The rests, the rests!" She stops mid-melody, her voice rebounding.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Himmelricht," he chants, and she wonders, for the first time, if he is mocking her. (Certainly not.)

"Samuel," she says, gathering her patience. "Let's have a break for a minute. Tell me now, what is a rest?"

"Space," he says. "Pieces of nothing stuck between notes."

"Nothing?!!" The pianist has never lost her composure with any of her students, but she feels it slowly waltzing away. She cannot let it go, not with so much at stake. "What did you say? Rests are just as vital as notes, Samuel. Without notes, it is all rests. But without the rests—and in their proper proportion and placement, no less—the music ceases to be music."

The pianist grasps the boy by the shoulders with her solid, tired hands. "How important is a rest? How can music be—"

"Most important, Ms. Himmelricht," the boy chimes, shrinking from her grip. "Most important."

The pianist stands up, raises her hands above her as if inciting the gods, and says, "You need not think, Samuel, only play!"

The story, the story—what to tell? Is it necessary to tell you of the events that followed, of what brought me to leave? Is it worth the pain of recalling? Have I not told enough as it is? No, I must finish it through. This is for me, after all.

At the beginning of every fiscal year, the department allocates a set amount of funds for professors' use on students—new sheet music,
festival fees, and the like—under the discretion of the treasury chair (who, by coincidence, happens to be Ms. Himmelricht). It is because of these funds that the boy, on this evening, is dressed impeccably: a custom-fit child’s tuxedo, cummerbund and all, in traditional black and white. The pianist had, the week before, brought the boy to the tuxedo shop during a lesson, as she was sure that his mother would never give consent.

She is surprised, however, to see Samuel’s father at the performance, a man who leads him into the lobby by the hand. The father’s black turtleneck is tucked into his corduroys, and he kneels down before Samuel, pulls a thin wire comb from his jacket pocket and smoothes the boy’s hair to the side. He pats the boy on each shoulder before nudging him backstage.

The pianist’s stomach emits a mezzo piano groan (she never eats before a performance). She has decided to ignore department tradition by exhibiting Samuel in a duet with her, directly before her solo. It is, perhaps, her frenzied state of zeal—they will all finally see the mastery she has sculpted in the boy—that has made her block from memory the threatening notes from Dean Yarbrough on blue and gray University stationery: realign priorities...tuition-paying students...potential ramifications. (I still wonder, at nights when I cannot sleep and cannot ease my mind on the Steinway, for fear of waking my neighbors, if there had been any verbal warnings. I will admit now that I cannot remember.)

As she requested, the pianist will not debut Samuel until the second to last piece, saving the best—her own solo—for the end. She reminds herself that he has performed before, but nothing so important as this. The entire faculty knows the stakes: not just a community concert, no. Competition hangs in the air, and her normally placid colleagues flit here and there behind stage like bees shaken in a jar. But not the pianist. It still astounds her that after all their years of training—masters, doctorals, fellowships—not a one of them shows pre-performance ease. Professor Kliemens, leaning over her cello in the hallway, removes a dangling bowstring with an exasperated tug and cries, “To hell with it!” From behind a shut door of a practice room, Professor Brewer curses an ornery bassoon reed and storms into
the hallway, announcing to all, “I need some #600 sandpaper! Does anyone have #600 sandpaper?!?” Professor Keller, onstage next, puffs his cheeks and stretches his mouth wide, then clears the spit valve of his trombone with a quiet stream of air.

The boy, however, despite the pianist’s previous worries, does not appear nervous at all. He sits backstage in a wooden chair next to her, his eyes closed, hands resting softly on his starched black pants (practicing preparatory visualization like she taught him, she is pleased to see).

The Liszt etude the pianist has prepared for her solo is indisputably the most challenging of all the pieces chosen by her colleagues, and indeed one of the most difficult in existence. She’s devoted so much time to Samuel, which has admittedly detracted from her allotted seven hours of personal practice each day, but she does not doubt her magnificence will sweep the britches off the audience. The rapid tempo, the trills on weaker fingers, the jumps of two entire octaves in just a sixteenth of a beat. Anyone who’s anyone in piano knows what expertise the piece entails. The name itself sings in the pianist’s head: La Campanella. La Cam-pan-el-la.

The audience applauds Professor Flink, who has just given a slightly slower-than-tempo performance of Stravinsky, and the pianist bends down to look Samuel in the eyes.

*Let’s show them.*

This is what she feels the urge to say, though she stops herself, noticing the boy’s crooked bow tie. “Oh, no,” she says, “that will never do.” She straightens the tie and pulls down the ends of the boy’s suit coat and reminds him not to sit on the tails. The audience has hushed, and though the pianist cannot decipher any specific comments, she relishes the murmurs and whispers, seeping like fog through the concert hall. She knows the audience is conversing about a name unknown to them—Samuel Parson—boldface type in the program.

The pianist blurts one last protective instruction—“Remember the rests”—and leads the boy onto the stage beside her. Samuel bows like a pro, in perfect unison with the pianist—two seconds down and two seconds up—and the pianist remembers the pride she felt on the day she soloed in Carnegie Hall, and how, in this moment, with all eyes
honed on her and her prodigy, she feels more accomplished than she
did even then.

It isn’t until now, looking back on it, that I remember noting how
small the boy was next to that slick black grand piano, the top curve
of the lid reaching a good three feet above his head. I could have shut
him inside it with plenty of room to spare, if I had wanted to. If I had
known.

The boy’s hands probe out from the tight cuffs of his tuxedo,
smooth baby’s skin pale under the stage lights, and his body shakes as
he seats himself on a bench beside the pianist’s. She cannot help but
notice his lips pursed tightly, the wetness in his eyes as he looks up at
her, pleading with a gaze of an animal being put down.

They must begin. They cannot sit much longer, dangling in a
silence that admits hesitancy. They will stun the audience, as planned.
If they only begin.

They must begin.

And, for a moment, the pianist is reassured, for the boy starts
playing when she nods. She closes her eyes and listens before her entry,
laying each staccato tersely with the left, legato smoothly with the right,
perfect.

The pianist doesn’t know where it comes from, what happens next.
Like Victor Frankenstein, she had not realized her experiment would
turn into a monster, out of her control. And she cannot recall, until
many months later, why or when it all slipped away. But when the
pianist enters the piece, a succession of delicate chords in the high treble
octaves, the boy suddenly speeds up the tempo. An image comes to her
mind that will stay with her long after this performance: after watching
her mother and father’s ship depart for Europe, finding her father’s hat
upturned on the pier, fluttering in the sea gusts, its straw fibers wet and
thickening. As the pianist’s fingers move now and her ears fail to block
out the gasps rippling across the audience, she remembers finding that
hat and knowing she would have all those years—her entire life—to
wonder if he’d left it for her on purpose, or if he had, more likely,
simply forgotten it.

She glances at the boy from the corner of her eye, his chest
hiccupping in mouse-like breaths, gaze wide and unblinking, hands skittering quicker and quicker across the keys, leaving no space between the notes, skipping entire measures, the tones clanging like broken church bells.

The pianist’s vision becomes patchy as she hears the boy approach the finish. Like a conductor whose orchestra will not follow the wand, the boy finishes their duet an entire page ahead of her, a concluding chord in the lowest octave, stabbing his weight into the notes, firmly three times—down—down—down— releasing his hands immediately before standing up and shuffling off stage without even a bow.

And before the pianist blacks out, she sees this: the audience, the boy’s father in the front row. Hands folded calmly in his lap. Yellowed teeth breaking loose in an unabashed smile.

This is not the end of her story. There was “La Campanella.” There were notes played, notes missed, flat notes sharped and sharp notes flatted, melodies from random songs woven in and out of her solo. But I cannot remember them. The performance, each day, works its way slowly back into my mind, sliding over me like a snake around the neck.

As the pianist has heard tell from Professor Kliemens—the only one with the decency still to contact her, now and then—there was a bit of applause. Some even stood, though the pianist suspects only out of sympathy. The pianist knows of the fainting behind stage, the splashing of cold water on her face to revive her, the taxi being called to take her home. She knows of the letter of resignation, though she does not recall the writing of it. The quick packing, the change of address. And she knows, above all, that this is not the end of her story.

The pianist’s life is different now, more blank time to fill her days. She has begun taking walks. She practices some mornings. Others, she meanders through neighborhoods near her house at the edge of town, along the bluff that overlooks the farmlands, along the curving sidewalk paths where the dirty scabs of snow have begun to disintegrate into a slurry of ashen mud. Graying men drive the gravel roads into town every morning, clunking their rusted pickups over potholes. They raise one finger from the steering wheel when they pass.
Maybe, in time, her wrong notes will be righted. Maybe, in time, this new place will start to color, and the pianist will not feel as if she lives in a portrait of black and white. The neighbors will hear her through the walls and ask her to play for them—a song, any song—and she will close her eyes and return to that time in her life when the notes swelled under her skin, when she only had to breathe to release them. She holds onto this hope, and to the nights, the darkness, the corner of the dining room where her Steinway sits, lid propped open like the arms of an old friend, forgiving.