

He Was No Amateur

It was one of those things. Your distant Aunt Sylvia dies and she leaves you something you don't want. In my case, her baby grand piano.

I'm no musician. Let's get that out of the way. I can't carry a tune or pick out a melody. I learned *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* as a kid like everyone else and could still bang it out one finger a time, but that's it.

I did have extra space in my apartment since Steph moved out, since the break-up. Our spare room was lined with bookcases full of *her* books —travel guides, adolescent psych textbooks, all her Russian novels. She took it all and left an emptiness. Isn't that how it goes?

Not just extra space, I had extra time. The restaurant was closed for who knows how long. Weeks, months, years maybe. It was all guesswork. It was all experts pontificating, the rest of us obeying.

I had time to learn a musical instrument. What else was I going to do – watch Netflix all day? I struck a few random keys and the piano wheezed like it was infected with some musical virus. I couldn't distinguish a D sharp from an A minor but I knew something was off. Aunt Sylvia probably hadn't played it in thirty years. Either that or she was deaf. Likely both.

So I did what any reasonable unemployed person does. I went bargain-hunting on Craigslist services. There were a few ads for piano tuners, but the one that caught my eye had the magic word in the subject line: "Amateur Piano Tuner." *Amateur*. I didn't want to spend a lot of dough. The ad was brief. It read: "Hello – I'm an amateur piano tuner. I don't feel the need to sell my services here. I'll let my tuning do my talking for me."

We exchanged a few emails and he agreed to the magic fee: fifty bucks. In his final message, he wrote, "I want to assure you, Daniel. I'm taking all precautions with my customers. I'm taking this very seriously."

"That's fine, thanks," I responded. I wanted to write, "Don't worry about it, Simon. I'm as strong as a black-maned lion," but I held off. Humor was a dying animal.

I was sitting by the window when the car pulled up to the curb. A gray Ford Fiesta dented on the front bumper, battered around the rear body, and plastered with an enormous decal of a green dragon on the driver's side door. The driver turned the car off and sat with his hands holding the wheel for a minute as if in prayer. Then he got out and walked to the rear of the car. That's when I headed downstairs to let him in.

I opened the front door to a man in lime green snorkeling goggles and double masked. The inner mask was one of those white conical things that are supposed to trap every nanoparticle that could ever come out of someone's mouth, and the smaller, outer mask was made of cloth. The smaller mask was the special one. It featured an insignia of a dragon next to a man thrusting a fire-shooting scimitar.

"You must be Simon," I said.

"Yes, indeed," he said, drawing out each syllable, and then nodded. He wore blue latex gloves and carried a black kit.

"Come on up," I said and started up the stairs ahead of him. I turned over my shoulder and added, "Sorry, I have a mask inside if you want me to wear it."

"I'm protected," he said.

“I’m on the third floor.” We climbed the rest of the way in silence. As soon as we walked into my apartment, he said, “So where’s your baby?”

“My baby? It’s just me.” I wasn’t playing dumb. I figured he had me confused with another customer. A parent.

“Your baby,” he repeated. “Where’s your *baby*? Your piano.”

“Oh my baby, my piano, oh, yeah, in this other room.”

I led him into the spare room where Steph used to read her books and practice yoga and transcendental meditation. He opened up his kit and pulled out some tools. “I’m going to be a while,” he said.

I let him be. I went on the computer and surfed the Internet. YouTube videos. I had developed a strange habit of watching crocodile videos. Nile crocodiles. It was all so antediluvian and predictable but once I started watching, I couldn’t stop. I watched hoping the quarry would escape, knowing they wouldn’t, knowing that was the whole reason for the video. Wildebeests, zebras, impalas, every African ungulate under the blistering African sun chomped, rolled, ripped, throttled. Every once in a while, I could hear piano notes ring out. I got up and checked on Simon.

“Need anything Simon?” I said.

The back of the piano was flung open and he was hunched over it like a car mechanic.

“How old is this piano?” he leaned back and asked.

“No idea, maybe fifty years. Maybe more. Why? Is it a lost cause?”

“I could tell it was old. It’s well-constructed.”

“Yeah, you could tell?” I asked just to ask something.

“I could tell.”

“Can I ask you something?” He didn’t respond so I assumed that was a yes. “What’s with the dragon stuff? The decal, the mask?” I couldn’t see his nose and mouth and there’s so much revealed in the nose and mouth, but there were wrinkles around his eyes. Crow’s feet. So I knew: He wasn’t young. I was young. I was twenty-five.

“When I was a child, my mother used to play the piano to me to help me fall asleep. Classical music. Schubert. Haydn. I had terrible insomnia. And as she played, I had a stuffed animal of a dragon that I hugged. I hugged and I hugged and I hugged this stuffed animal until eventually I fell asleep.”

“That’s interesting,” I fumbled.

“My mother died three months ago.”

“Oh geez, I’m sorry to hear that,” I said. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks,” he said softly. And then he came over and told me to give it a try and see how it sounded. So I leaned over and played the seven or eight notes to *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*. They sounded exactly as they did before. Whiny and shrill. Right notes, wrong sound.

Simon chuckled. “I wouldn’t give up bartending,” he said. And then I had a few thoughts going through my head, angry thoughts, but I just said, “That’s good advice,” and then I paid him his money and I thanked him for his good work. And then he left.