

## The Experiment

If I had met Joey and Miss B in different places, I never would have pictured them in the same room. I sure wouldn't have pictured them changing each others' lives.

Miss B likes to tell people she's a gardener. That ends the conversation with the *uninteresting* ones, as she puts it. If you aren't one of those, you might get her to unspool her full title: Ruth Carol Bartholomew, Founder and Headmistress of Miss B's Garden of Music for Budding Talents. And bud they do--*we* do, actually, me being one of her piano students. Most of us make it into music programs like Juilliard or Eastman.

And all from a school in Tampa that nobody's ever even heard of, unless they happen to be savvy to the local music scene. People know her success stories are true, but they don't know how she accomplishes it. You'd probably think she only accepts the cream of the crop, but that's not the case.

Which brings me to Joey. Joey Macheese could not claim to be the cream of anything. I might call him a diamond in the rough, but even that's a stretch.

I got to be good friends with Joey after he came to Miss B's. We've had our ups and downs, something I'll get into later. He calls me Em, which I never let anyone do, but he has a way of getting to me. To everyone else I'm Emma.

Anyway, Joey grew up in Ybor, the old Latin Quarter of Tampa where the Italians and Cubans lived mostly on cigar-making back a hundred years ago. Now it's more of a run-down artsy neighborhood, if you know what I mean. His dad owns a hole-in-the-wall cafe that stays in business mainly on his lasagna recipe. Joey's mom helps out, and they seem happy whenever I see them.

Joey told me no one in his family ever had any musical talent. One day when he was six, he climbed up on his Aunt Mima's piano bench and started to play. Just like that. He does have this amazing ear, I think perfect pitch. His folks didn't have a piano, but Mima gave him hers, and she knew a teacher named Stan Perez who was willing to trade piano lessons for lasagna.

After a few years, Stan realized Joey was playing better than he was, so he inquired at Miss B's and set Joey up with an audition.

So onto the Himes Avenue bus gets Joey Macheese, age fourteen, in this short tie and long jacket, too much hair gel making him look like somebody out of the *Godfather*, to Miss B's for his audition. His mom came with him. He said later that when he got to the school building and saw that it looked like the White House, only haunted and covered with vines, he got this urge to hold his mom's hand--or else turn around and run the other way.

The doorbell rang, and it was Joey and his mom.

"Hi," I said, "I'm Emma." I'm one of the students who helps Miss B with things like greeting new people, making tea, that sort of thing. "You must be Joseph Macheese?"

"Ma-kay-zee."

I said oh sorry, no one ever gets my last name right either.

"What is it?"

"Smith," I giggled, but Joey let out this big laugh that turned out to be almost a trademark.

I recall telling him and his mom how much I loved Miss B's, been here three years, I'm fifteen, a sophomore, yes, here, have a seat, she'll be right in. Joey says I can chatter to the point he has no idea how I'm breathing.

"Would you like some fresh hot tea?" My question to all guests.

Joey's mom said no thank you.

"You got any iced sweet tea?"

The mom shot him a look, like *You are not in your dad's restaurant*.

"Sorry. No thanks, I'm good."

I had to run to class, so I left them in the parlor to wait for Miss B. I remember them looking things up and down. The place has kind of a seen-better-days vibe to it--chandelier so dusty it swallows all its own light, old square grand piano with a sign on it that says *Do Not Play*, potted plants all over the place.

Joey said Miss B just materialized out of nowhere and floated over to them. She didn't make a sound, not even footsteps, which spooked him. You do have to get used to her. She reminds me of Liszt--the composer? Very tall and thin with short, straight hair the color of snow

with a tinge of dirt in it. She wears a lot of men's smoking jackets (go ahead and look up what they are--I had to) with long flowing skirts.

Here's how it went:

"Joseph, Mrs. Machese...pleasure to meet you." Heavy southern, highly ornamented, big curvy hairpin dynamics. "So Joseph, you wish to study piano here with me."

He was *so* wishing not to, right then. She seemed to be able to look right through him. His tie was feeling too tight.

"Miss Bartholomew," said his mom, "We've been told he has a gift--"

"Of course, Mrs. Machese," Miss B said while sweeping the air with her hand. Joey noticed her fingers were long with blunt tips. "Every aspiring musician who comes through that door has been told he or she has a gift. We have to determine whether your son has--what I call *promise*--and if so, we must do what it takes to realize this promise. More to the point, *Joseph* must do what it takes." She looked back at him.

"I practice, like two hours a day," Joey's voice cracked. He instantly thought *Jesus, good thing I'm not applying for voice lessons.*

So she said that was a good start, and now she wanted to hear him play. Miss B led him up the grand staircase, and his mom said his face looked pale, like he expected the gallows at the other end.

But her studio is nicer than you'd think--it's airy, with big windows. Big ebony Bosendorfer grand.

"All right, Joseph, what will you play today?"

He looked down at the keyboard, which grinned back at him malevolently. "Beethoven, Sonata Opus..." *What's the number, what's the freaking number...*

"Well, just go ahead and play. Then we'll know which one it is, won't we?"

It turned out to be Opus 14, number 1, and he got enough of it out decently, even past the sweat that kept making his fingers slip off the black keys.

When he was through, she asked Beethoven's dates, and he didn't know *those*. He had to be shitting a brick at that point. But miracle of miracles, Miss B said he did show *promise*, although he had a lot of catching up to do.

And so began Joey's education here at Miss B's. The thirty of us students do all our schooling here, because Miss B has the general college prep academics too. She only charges what each family can afford, which is great, and Joey had no worries. Well, almost none.

Miss B insists on High Tea being served every afternoon from 2:00 to 3:00 for students. We do it in two shifts. I brew it up, and a couple of us serve and do clean-up every day. Joey helps me all the time, and if I thought he was a little crude, now I have to admit he's pretty sweet.

Joey's one worry? He liked Tea *too* much. Not the half-hour break, the actual beverage. He told me that every morning on the bus, he was daydreaming--and not about, say, Brittany Fong, who he thinks is unbelievably hot; daydreaming about *Tea*.

He almost told his parents, but changed his mind. He figured his mom would freak. And he felt fine. He was doing great on the keyboard--he was on his third Chopin Etude. If you don't know those, rest assured they're hard.

Still, it was weird.

I didn't know how serious this worry of his was, until he asked to get on my bus with me in the afternoon, then circle back and transfer to his. He wanted to talk in private, he said. I thought maybe he had a crush...but then he was obsessed with Brittany, so that didn't seem likely. Curiosity had me.

Here's how the bus conversation went:

"Okay, Em, here's the deal. I need you to help me with a little experiment."

"Experiment?" I wondered where this was going.

"Yeah. Have you noticed anything weird about Miss B's tea?"

"Are you still on the tea thing? No... it just tastes like normal tea. Although...I never actually liked hot tea until I went there. Guess it grew on me."

"See, that's just it! I hated hot tea, remember? But now I can't *wait* 'til Tea every day. How fucked up is that?"

I got that sinking sensation you get when something you've been denying stares you in the face.

We spent the rest of the forty-minute bus ride talking about the tea. No, I didn't know where Miss B got it; all I did was brew and serve it. But yes, I had the craving--I just hadn't admitted it. We agreed that you didn't get a high, or seem to want more and more or anything, like a junkie. One cup did it. Whatever *it* was.

"Em...so you think this is strange too, right? Well, I thought of a way to find out if the tea *is* doing something."

"You've already thought this out?"

"Sort of. We'll get some regular tea and give it to the 2:00 Tea group. That'll be the placebo. You know what that is, right? And we'll keep giving Miss B's tea to the 2:30 group. Oh, and be sure *she* drinks her own stuff."

I was horrified. "Oh god, I don't know, Joey. You mean, do this behind her back? She trusts me. I feel terrible about--"

"Em, how bad will you feel if you're doping everybody without *them* knowing?"

It was hard to come back on that one.

So we would start the experiment on Monday. Joey's dad always ordered this tea called *Tifton* in bulk for the cafe. Joey would sneak some out and supply it to me, and I would pull the switch for half the students. We could make observations, and also drink the placebo to see if we started to feel any different.

Nothing much happened at first. I was surprised at how easy it was to disguise the *Tifton*, and nobody said a word about the taste being any different. But after about three weeks you started to overhear some things.

"I just don't get it," Brittany Fong said to me in the girls' room. She was one of the top violin students. "My lesson with Kornwell today? *Epic fail.*"

"Wow, that's rare. What happened?"

"Well, I was playing the Mendelssohn, and...I couldn't make my left hand move the way it should, and then she said my bowing was weak. I mean, I thought I had that piece down. Emma, it was so scary!"

"Oh, you know old lady Kornwell, she's so super-critical. She's probably just trying to fine-tune--"

“No, it’s not that. Even *I* could tell my playing was like crap.”

I didn’t think too much about it, especially because I had a competition coming up, and I was using all my time practicing and trying not to be a nervous wreck. It was the final round of the state Pre-College Concerto Competition. The first prize was \$2000 cash and a scholarship. I was playing the Grieg on Saturday with the University Orchestra. It was a huge deal, and all my family and friends were coming to the Finals.

So my practice session that day went down the tubes. Grieg has those big Nordic sweeps that have to be just right, and they were just--*not*. The orchestra rehearsal two days ago had gone pretty well, but today... Stress. Best to just call it a day.

You can envision the scene Saturday evening at the University concert hall: Four of us finalists backstage in formalwear, scared shitless, trying to act like we played concertos all the time in front of people; Miss B and all the faculty out there, students, friends and families; Joey, fifth row-left of center with his mom and dad; everybody a little jumpy.

In the front sit five judges. I have the first slot on the program.

The theater darkens, and the stage lights come on. The orchestra tunes up. The conductor comes out, takes a bow, then talks about these four wonderful performances about to happen. Then it’s time for me to come out.

I’m in this new midnight-blue silk gown. It swishes nicely as I walk onto the stage. The lights are brighter than I expect, almost blinding. I bow, sit at the Steinway concert grand, take a deep breath, and nod to the conductor: *ready*.

The tympani rolls to the first crashing chord. I strike it with dramatic force, and then the majestic descending chords. They come out flawlessly. Close your eyes and it could be Martha Argerich. The next passage goes fine. The orchestra comes in with an ethereal, forest sprite-like melody, and I echo it.

Or more like shit on it.

*Something’s wrong*. In the next instant, I have to pick up a fast passage that I haven’t missed in months--until now. I’m behind the orchestra. They’re playing on. The conductor is

looking at me. I'm fucking frozen. I try to play a few notes, catch up somehow--but I draw a blank. I am lost, totally lost. Nothing to do but put both hands in my lap.

The orchestra comes to a stop.

The conductor gives me a *do you want to start again* signal.

I blink, my eyes beginning to water at the brightness of the lights. I mouth *No*, stand, and walk off the stage. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of one of the judges slowly shaking his head as he writes something down.

I know now. I can't do this--not now, maybe never.

I remember mumbling *excuse me* as I ran through the backstage area, past the others, and out the side door. I never even looked up, because eye contact with winners was too painful for a loser. I knew Joey would look for me, but he was the last person I wanted to see. He tried calling and texting me over and over. I basically cried on my mom's shoulder all weekend, and didn't even talk to Miss B when she called.

Monday morning I dragged myself back to school. I'd come in early because Miss B wanted to have a talk over tea. She had already made up a pot, so we had a couple of cups and a heart-to-heart that really helped. I still felt crappy, but at least I had a glimmer of hope.

Joey showed up and wanted to talk, but I hid in a practice room.

By Tea time, I couldn't avoid him any longer. He came into the kitchen while I was making the tea, and gave me this lost-puppy look--like it was *his* most horrible weekend of *his* life.

I lost it. "Joey, please leave. Not now!"

"Em, come on...I am so sorry about what happened, it really, really sucked--"

"Joey, the experiment is over. The regular tea--it's killing us!"

"What? It's just Tifton straight from the restaurant! I drank it for years, it can't be doing anything."

"For god's sake, Joey. It made me forget how to play the piano!"

Then he said I had it backwards, it was *Miss B's* tea, and we'd all been addicted, but now we weren't craving it anymore, wasn't that great.

He still wasn't getting it.

"Joey, yes it's Miss B's tea--it's why we *were* doing so great. Brittany and I both had the same problems playing when we quit drinking it, and I've heard other kids saying the same thing. And surprise, it's the ones from the *placebo* group.

"Hmm. Miss B did rip me a new one last Thursday for 'extraordinary sloppiness' during my lesson. I've been a little unfocused, I got to admit..."

"So you're *unfocused*, and I'm humiliated big time. Really Joey? Is that what we came here for?"

"Okay, Em, you got it. Experiment over, we go back to Miss B's tea."

"Thank you."

And then he said he was going to fake-sip at Tea, and stay off the stuff to see how it went. Whatever.

"Em..."

"What?"

"Can I have a sample of Miss B's tea? I just want to see if we can find out what's in it. Maybe some lab can do an analysis, or something."

Jesus, did he never give up? I spooned some loose tea into a ziplock baggie and handed it to him.

"Thanks. Where do you think might analyze it?"

"How the hell would I know? Joey, would you *please* get out of the kitchen so I can get this done?"

Later he told me he sent the sample right to the Tifton tea company, claimed it was theirs, and that something seemed wrong with it.



The next four weeks passed pretty uneventfully. I was doing a lot better, and so was everybody else. Except Joey. I saw him in the practice rooms working like a fool every day, but when he played some Bach for me, for the first time I was having to keep the shock off my face. Really not good. He was beginning to believe my theory about the tea.

So the next Thursday I was at school early, and in walked Joey, with this look I couldn't quite read. Confusion? He had a folded paper, like a one-page letter in his hand, and was about to show it to me, when he spotted Miss B coming down the stairs. She had on one of her smoking jackets--a bronze-colored one--and a bright yellow scarf that matched her skirt.

He stuffed the paper into his back pocket. "Show this to you later, Em."

"Good morning, Joseph. 'Morning, Emma."

"Morning, Miss B."

"Joseph, your lesson is at 9:00 today, isn't it? Might I suggest you use this time to practice?"

No surprise, Joey agreed. He took the stairs two-by-two to the practice rooms, and I figured he could show me that paper at lunch.

Except later when he reached into his pocket to get it, it wasn't there.

"Crap! It must've fallen out of my pocket. Did you see it anywhere, Em?"

"Duh. No, or I would be showing it to *you* right now."

"Man, I wonder where it is. It's the letter from the lab at Tifton. It came up negative--bupkis, just plain old *tea*. I don't get it, they had to've missed something."

"Hm. Weird. Well, I guess that settles that."

Just then Miss B glided in soundlessly and tapped Joey on the shoulder. She had the letter in her hand.

"Joseph...I found this on the stairs just after your lesson this morning. I want to see you and Emma in my studio after class. Four-thirty."

"Yes Ma'am." We were both dead.

It felt like the afternoon would never end. Must be what dread does to you. Finally 4:30 rolled around, and Joey and I went up to Miss B's studio. She came in carrying a tray with two cups of tea.

"Here," handing a cup to Joey, "Drink up. Freshly brewed."

"No thanks, I'm not really thirsty."

Did he just *say* that?

"Oh, I insist. You know how I value our traditions, and Tea is an important one."

He evidently couldn't come up with anything else, so he drained the cup in a few gulps.

She handed him the other cup. "Here you go, this is for you too."

"Miss B--"

She looked theatrically at the teacup, then back at Joey.

He finished off the tea.

"All right, now let's discuss what's going on. This letter has helped me to clarify the recent situation, which was troubling me no end. Joseph, Emma...as you no doubt know, we've been dealing with multiple students having undue difficulties and resulting stress over it. Joseph, you are the only one who has not overcome it in the past few weeks. Now it's becoming clear as to why."

"Miss B, it wasn't just Joey." I wasn't sure how much to say. She obviously knew something was up, but how much had she figured out? I felt guilty for my complicity, but didn't want to incriminate us both.

"I suspected as much, Emma. Since you made the tea, and you and Joey are close friends. I do have to say, I'm shocked at this whole thing."

We were waiting for the ax to fall.

"Let me give the two of you some food for thought. There is a reason every graduate from the Garden has been successful. It has to do with talent and discipline, but also proper *nourishment*. Without that--how do I put it? You hit a wall. Joseph, you've found yours. And Emma, I felt so terrible for the way you found yours, but you've recovered well."

Joey asked if we were going to be kicked out.

“Would I have bothered to give you the tea if you were? No, you’ll recover too, just as Emma has. I would be justified in expelling you for stirring up this mischief, but you’re getting another chance for one reason. Thanks to you, I have had a small epiphany. We at the Garden have been so focused on nourishing musical promise, we’ve neglected to nourish *humility*. So I’m instituting a new policy. During the course of study, each student will take a six-week sabbatical.”

“Sabbatical?”

“That’s time off, Joey,” I said.

“What, from school?”

“Oh, heavens no! From Tea.”

We both eventually graduated with honors. Meanwhile, we didn’t talk about the experiment, until one random afternoon at Tea. Joey and I were out on the verandah, and he said this:

“Wonder what she did with that letter?”

“Does it really matter?”

“No, not really. It didn’t prove anything anyway, dumbshit lab.”

That was when I confessed.

“Joey...that tea sample? It wasn’t Miss B’s. I put Tifton in that baggie.”

He laughed so crazy hard, his eyes watered.

He raised his teacup to mine.

“To the experiment,” he said.

And he didn’t say this, but we were both thinking it was a damn good thing we were musicians and not scientists.

